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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: ELECTIONS: FRENETIC CAMPAIGNING CONTINUES

REF: Port of Spain 1030

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The past week has seen continued frenetic campaigning as Trinidad and Tobago's three major political parties jockey for position in advance of the November 5 vote. With two weeks to go, Prime Minister Manning's ruling People's National Movement (PNM) party remains the favorite, though the unreliability of polling and the daily ups-and-downs of the race make firm predictions difficult. The past week of campaigning saw growing discussion of opposition claims that Manning, if he wins a "special majority" (three-quarters of House seats), wants to reform the constitution and replace the current parliamentary system with a presidential form of government, making himself an elected "dictator." Manning belied these charges and said any moves to change the constitution would be completely transparent and subject to wide public debate. The opposition United National Congress (UNC) and Congress of the People (COP) parties continued to focus their fire on the PNM. The UNC, for its part, maintained its schizophrenic stance toward the COP, bashing it, but also leaving the door open to forming a united opposition front. The COP has so far refused such blandishments. A small group of CARICOM observers will monitor the elections. END SUMMARY.

1A. A DOUBLE-SECRET DRAFT CONSTITUTION

12. (SBU) Constitutional reform to move toward an executive presidential system from the current parliamentary (i.e., prime ministerial) system with a ceremonial president has been under discussion since at least August 2006. A draft constitution, to replace the current 1976 document, was circulated in the House of Representatives, but given the last parliament's balance of forces, it went nowhere. Charging it had gotten hold of a second, secret version of the proposed draft constitution, the opposition

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charged this week that Manning wanted to turn himself into an elected dictator for life. Manning belittled these charges and said there is nothing secret about the ongoing constitutional review process and promised that any future moves to change the constitution would be transparent and open to public debate.

13. (SBU) Opposition rumblings over "dictator" Manning cut a couple of ways. They highlight his sometimes high-handed tendencies with those he disagrees with "including in his party" and may sway some votes in marginal districts. They also, though, suggest the opposition is concerned that the PNM might gain a large electoral victory and play into the PNM "go with a winner" advertising theme. This is the case since Manning could only reform the entire constitution if his party

won three-quarters of the House races (31 of 41 seats). Other portions of the document, or laws related to it, could be changed (depending on the provision in question) if the PNM wins 28 seats (two-thirds of the House) or 25 seats (three-fifths). Perhaps due to the complications in explaining these possibilities, opposition parties have focused on the 31 seats/dictator-in-waiting charge.

FESTIVE MOOD AS CANDIDATES FILE PAPERS

14. (SBU) On October 15, all candidates had to file their nominating papers.

Despite constant rain, the major parties turned out raucous crowds to watch their candidates turn in the required paperwork. Both the PNM and COP presented candidates for all 41 seats; however, the UNC chose not to contest the two seats in Tobago, instead making an accommodation with a local Tobago-based alliance. The Tobago race will be uphill for the opposition; the island's two seats are currently in PNM hands.

15. (SBU) Former UNC Cabinet Minister Mervyn Assan will contest the San Fernando East seat for the COP, which is currently held by the Prime Minister. Manning has won election nine straight times and neither Assan nor UNC candidate Frederick Norman is considered a threat to him. UNC leader Basdeo Panday also is considered a sure thing for his seat, his legal woes notwithstanding. COP leader Winston Dookeran has fewer reasons to be confident. The St. Augustine seat held by him has been a UNC stronghold for the past 12 years. Dookeran won the seat as a UNC member before forming the COP, but his re-election could be jeopardized if the COP and UNC split the opposition vote.

16. (SBU) In some ways, the St. Augustine race is a microcosm of the entire election. If the UNC and COP, which broke off from it a year ago, draw enough support from one another, it could allow marginal

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PNM candidates to win and jeopardize some traditional opposition strongholds. Recognizing that a combined opposition would be in a better position win, the UNC stated its new deadline (there has been a different one just about every week) for the COP to unite with it was October 31. That is legally the last day for any agreement since no alterations to the ballot can be made within five days of the November 5 vote.

(Note: Though ballots would already be printed, local election officials would take actions to alert voters to any candidates that had dropped out as part of an opposition deal). Nevertheless, Dookeran does not trust Panday and would lose support (and face) if he joined with the man he broke with a year ago. If the COP were to ally with the UNC, it also would be a tacit admission that the party might not outlive this election, ending its goal of replacing the UNC as the main opposition party if it fails to secure the government.

OPINION POLLS: YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR

17. (SBU) Figuring out how this will all come out is made more difficult by the unreliability of local polls. A Wickham poll released October 14 indicates the COP is leading the PNM and that Dookeran is the preferred candidate for Prime Minister. A Selwyn Ryan and Associates poll taken at the end of September and beginning of October suggests the PNM leads the COP by five percent. A recent NACTA poll was spun as showing the UNC with a huge lead over the COP and the PNM, but it only encompassed three safe constituencies already in UNC hands.

Some analysts, in private conversations with us, have downplayed the published polls, saying they are biased, with the results pre-determined. All parties are reportedly doing their own private surveys.

ELECTION MONITORING LIGHT

¶8. (U) Early in the campaign, the opposition called for widespread international monitoring of the elections. Manning, however, determined only to invite CARICOM to observe the elections and a small team (between 9 and 14) from that organization is expected to monitor the vote. Local parties all have poll observers and the balloting is expected to be fair and transparent. Opposition parties have made less noise about this lately, perhaps judging the issue had little traction with the public.

COMMENT: ONWARD AND?

¶9. (SBU) The PNM remains the favorite, but it still remains too early to call this race. While the COP continues to make an impressive showing in rallies, it also seems to be running short of funds, perhaps an indication that the party's initial momentum has waned (COP leaders say they are marshalling their funds for a last week push). The UNC had a relatively quiet week, having buried (for the moment) its internal soap opera over who would lead it "and Trinidad" if it were to win the election.

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